MAHALIA: FAITH HERO
Psalms 137:1-6
Colossians 3:12-17
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This is another installment in the once-in-a-while sermon series which focuses on the lives of outstanding Christians, to see how their faith directed their lives. The thesis is that Christians inspire best by their example--including inspiring other Christians.

Why should our Faith Heroes include a skinny little black girl with a big voice who never completed eighth grade, who was nicknamed "Hooks" because her misformed legs looked like parentheses? The reason Mahalia Jackson must be seen as a Faith Hero goes way back, centuries back to the ancient Hebrews.

Back in fact to Israel's book of worship, the Old Testament Book of Psalms. Singing was the very heart of their worship of the one true God, who had formed them into a people and brought them from slavery to freedom. Over and over the Psalms emphasize the need to sing: "O come let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation." "Sing unto the Lord a new song: sing unto the Lord, all the earth." "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the lands."

In Israel the tribe of Jubal was a vigorous race. Other people had other ministries, but these made melody to God. They taught Israel to sing and play musical instruments. Their music, the Psalms, ranged from the highest notes of triumphant rapture to the saddest minor key, all inspired by the workings of God.

Not only Mahalia's great musical talent, but also her own origins put her firmly into that succession of religious musicians. Her immediate ancestors were spiritual kin to the Israelites who also had been captured and taken into slavery. In Babylon the captives sang the haunting song of Psalm 137: (vss 1-6)

> By the rivers of Babylon we sat down;
> there we wept when we remembered Zion.
> On the willows near by we hung our harps.
> Those who captured us told us to sing;
> they told us to entertain them:
> "Sing us a song about Zion."
>
> How can we sing a song to the Lord in a foreign land?
> May I never be able to play the harp again
> if I forget you, Jerusalem!
> May I never be able to sing again
> if I do not remember you,
> if I do not think of you as my greatest joy!

Long before her day, Mahalia's people had resolved that question "how can we sing a song to the Lord in a foreign land?" And she inherited from them a faith which looked misery and hate in the eye and came away singing joyously of God's care and love.

Little Halie Jackson was born in 1911 in the strip of land above New Orleans between the railroad tracks and the Mississippi levee. Her father moved cotton on the river docks by day, barbered at night, and preached some on Sundays. Her mother worked as a housekeeper in the city until she died when Mahalia was five. Of all the large family that surrounded the little girl, it was her namesake, Aunt Mahala who took over raising her. Auntie Duke, she was called, the power of the family, an exceedingly strict religious woman. Mahalia later said the way Aunt Duke brought

her up gave her a strong will to survive. There are two ways to take that statement, and both apply.

The family's life and little Halie's revolved around Mt. Moriah Baptist Church. On Saturday nights there were silent movies in the church hall. Services were every evening. On Sunday mornings sinners were required to sit in the back pews. (Ya'll hear that back there? Sinners in the back pews.) Then they came forward from the sinners' pews to be prayed over by the preacher and be saved. On Baptism Sundays the women, all dressed in white, would lead the way out the door and across the street to the levee singing "Let's Go Down to the River Jordan," and the preacher would hold the services right there in the Mississippi, blessing the water and baptizing the congregation.

Through her early years, Mahalia's big voice made her a standout in the church youth choirs, but that didn't figure in at all when she made her first big move. She had quit school in the eighth grade because her help was needed with family finances She worked ten hour days as a laundress and all the rest of her life was proud she could iron a man's shirt in three minutes. Black girls could have only two higher aspirations in that day, to be a schoolteacher or a nurse. So, at the ripe old age of sixteen, Mahalia joined the procession of southern blacks to Chicago to pursue that dream. She saw it as her chance to escape Aunt Duke's overbearing dominance and the rigors of Southern racism.

The south side of Chicago was the second largest Black city in the world, next only to New York's Harlem. A major stop on the old slaves' Underground Railway into Canada, it was a home to all from the Deep South, including several of Mahalia's own family--aunts and uncles. She knew that and fitted in, at home almost immediately. And there were also many members of another family, one she didn't yet know she belonged to. The great jazz musicians from the South, who would later move on to New York, were holding forth then in Chicago--Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, Bessie Smith and many others. Mahalia had jazz in her blood. There are various theories of how jazz began, but I suppose Mahalia is as good an authority on the subject as any. She said jazz first began in the Holiness Churches of the Deep South, the congregational singing, and she was a personal witness to it.

In Chicago, Mahalia blossomed. Her own words were: "Whatever I am today I owe to Chicago, because in Chicago the Negro found the open door." She described life for the Blacks in the South, the life she had escaped: "It reminded me of how they grazed a mule on the levee from a stake--he could eat the grass in a circle all around and no further." The distinction was obviously very sharp for her, but the North was no racial paradise. Her home was shot and bombed. She was kept off national radio and television for years until her fame was simply so great it elevated her above petty racisms.

The Greater Salem Baptist Church was her second home in Chicago. Again, her voice had made her a standout in the choir. Together with Rev. Johnson's sons, she formed a little singing group. Then the Great Depression struck, devastating the Black community far worse than the white. Churches on the South Side were struggling desperately to keep their doors open. And the Johnson Gospel Singers were exactly what they needed. Mahalia and the boys were invited to sing in Black churches all around. A church would charge admission for an evening performance, keep most to pay for coal and the mortgage, and give the singers as much as $1.50. Mahalia's reputation grew swiftly in the community.

During the hot summer of 1934, Grandfather Paul came up from New Orleans to

visit. Mahalia went out of her way to entertain him and then thought how nice it would be if he had his picture taken before going back down South. He resisted, but she insisted that he go to a nearby picture studio with her money. She kept after him until he finally went with cousin Alice. The old man collapsed in the studio with a stroke and was rushed to the hospital. Wracked by guilt and grief, Mahalia prayed for her grandfather's life, bargaining with God that she would never again perform in a theater or vaudeville house. The old man recovered and she kept her promise, forever renouncing the high life of show business.

That promise kept her on the straight and narrow path of gospel singing. Louis Armstrong wanted her to sing with his band, but it was "No blues for Mahalia, baby." She explained, "I'll never give up my gospel songs for the blues. Blues are the songs of despair, but gospel songs are the songs of hope. When you sing them you are delivered of your burden."

She was still supporting herself by maid's work and her laundry tubs and ironing. After a decade in Chicago, she had saved enough to buy beauty parlor equipment and opened her own shop. A little later came "Mahalia's House of Flowers." She was doing concerts in big gospel tents and little store front churches without a thought her singing would ever support her. That changed quickly in 1950. Professors from all the prestigious music schools of the east were holding a symposium on folk music and Mahalia was invited to sing gospel songs for them. After her week with them, she was told "if you'd started out the door and down to the lake while you were singing 'Shall We Gather at the River', all of us great experts would have followed you and waded right into the water to be baptized." The academic community spread the word quickly and requests poured in upon Mahalia. One of the first was from Ed Sullivan. She was made official soloist for the National Baptist Convention, the largest Black church group in the world. And then she was asked to do a concert at Carnegie Hall and broke all attendance records.

It all moved fast after that. A European concert tour was being arranged when Mahalia decided she'd better find out why she had been feeling so bad recently. The doctors at Billings Hospital found cancer of the lymph glands, a slow growing cancer that required immediate major surgery and then treatment the rest of her life.

And what a life that cancer-ridden body carried on! Until her death twenty years later, she gave concerts all over the world, was personally received by the rulers of virtually every nation, became close friends with the greatest celebrities of the day.

At the 1956 Democratic convention, Mahalia was a surprise because Blacks were not then being invited to perform at the conventions. In the Alabama delegation, a wit piped up, "I need a washerwoman," which almost provoked a fistfight from Ohio. Then Mahalia sang. Mitch Miller reported, "You didn't dare breathe, it was such a tremendous moment."

One mountain top experience followed another in rapid, unending succession: Presidential inaugurations, most especially the one for President Kennedy, the first time she sang in public "The Star Spangled Banner"; honorary doctorates galore for the eighth grade drop-out; travel and concerts all over the world.

Very near the end of her years, Mahalia was in concert in New Delhi, India. Prime Minister Indira Ghandi had left after the program, but heard encores beginning and returned to stand in the exit nearest the stage listening. Seeing her there, Mahalia spoke about peace, about the important role of women, and then concluded by

getting the audience to join her in "We Shall Overcome," making it an international hymn. Mrs. Gandhi said to the American ambassador, "I will never hear a greater voice; I will never know a greater person."

In her own mind, the highest point in Mahalia's life was connected with many events she shared with a young Black minister. She first met Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1955 in Chicago. It was shortly after a woman in Montgomery, Ala. named Rosa Parks had refused to give up her seat to a white man and move to the back of the bus. She was arrested and convicted and the civil rights movement was ignited with a long bus boycott. Mahalia joined the Montgomery Rally to help raise funds through her concert and stayed on with Dr. King's nonviolent movement. She was beside him every important step of the way after that. Her magnificent singing and radiant personality inspired both soul and conscience.

But the highest point of all for Mahalia came in August 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. 210,000 people from all over the nation were united in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. For three hours the famous had spoken--no more than four minutes each, please--Belafonte, Poitier, Brando, Charlton Heston, Paul Newman, James Baldwin, William Warfield, Marian Anderson, and on and on. Mahalia's turn was just before the final climactic speech, the speech which Martin Luther King, Jr., would begin, "I have a dream...(of) the day when all God's children will be able to sing with new meaning 'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty...from every mountainside let freedom ring." Dr. King always told her what to sing just before he spoke and this time he whispered to her, "Mahalia, sing "I Been Rebuked and I Been Scorned." And so she sang...(Recording: "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned")

From the misery of Black Southern poverty to the most famous singer in the world, Mahalia never put on airs; she was always herself. Once a great university's accolades and an honorary doctorate had just been bestowed and she was addressed as "Dr. Jackson." Instantly, she replied, "Just Mahalia, baby."

She dedicated her whole life to delivering a message--the message of the Christian gospel, the message of God's love. I think Mahalia Jackson embodied precisely what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote to the early Christians at Colosae:

> You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So then, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you. And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity. The peace that Christ gives is to guide you in decisions you make; for it is to this peace that God has called you together in the one body. And be thankful. Christ's message in all its richness must live in your hearts. Teach and instruct one another with all wisdom. Sing psalms, hymns, and sacred songs; sing to God with thanksgiving in your hearts. Everything you do or say, then, should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, as you give thanks through him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:12-17)

As perhaps no one has ever sung, Mahalia sang to God with thanksgiving in her heart, consciously trying to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. As a result, she touched people deeply wherever she went and her own life was transformed into radiant joy. (Recording: "Come On Children, Let's Sing") AMEN